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THE ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF VERMONT:

AN ESSAY

READ BEFORE THE

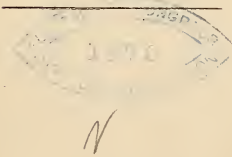
GENERAL CONVENTION OF VERMONT,

AT NEWBURY,

21 June 1866,

BY REV. PLINY H. WHITE.

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ESSAY.

It needs little argument to show that history is the only solid foundation upon which to build a well proportioned and enduring superstructure of learning. In every department of intellectual effort, the value of historical knowledge is recognized, and no one feels himself well grounded in his specific science, profession, or art, unless he knows the facts connected with its rise and progress. Facts are the food of the mind, which it digests, and from which it excogitates thoughts and principles. It is for lack of such food that many of the speculations of the German mind are so thin and watery, and it is because of an abundant supply of such nutriment that the Anglo-Saxon literature is so hearty and satisfying. How important history is to the theologian, may readily be inferred from this, that so very large a part of the Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testament, is history. Nor is the circumstance to be overlooked, that the historical portion of the Scriptures not only exceeds in quantity all the other portions, whether song, proverb, prophecy or epistle, but precedes them all in the order of arrangement. He who inspired the sacred volume and controlled its arrangement and proportions, has hereby given us very decided intimations as to the true value of historical knowledge.

History is valuable not only because it informs us as to the past, but because it throws light upon the present, and enables us to exercise a wise forecast as to the future. There is nothing new under the sun, and there is not likely to be. The great movements in social, political, and moral life, no less than the great movements of the planetary and stellar systems, are in circles. In due season the same combinations of causes occur again, and the events of history are repeated. "The thing that hath been is that which shall be." Even the extraordinary and apparently anomalous events that sometimes occur, would be found to have their precedents, if only our acquaintance with precedents was sufficiently extensive and minute. Our recent war, strange as it was, and accompanied by so many circumstances that were thought to be quite unparalleled, was but a repetition in America of what had previously been transacted in Europe among the cantons of Switzerland; our great tragedy, indeed, being performed upon a larger theatre, and with more extensive appointments, but presenting with astonishing fidelity all the leading features and a multitude of the minor details of its rehearsal on the transatlantic stage.

To a mind, therefore, capable of memory, analysis, and comparison, a thorough and critical knowledge of history will very often be equivalent to personal experience, as a guide through the tangled affairs of life. If history is thus important to the intelligent man in whatever department of effort, it is of pre-eminent importance to him who has to do with the moral and religious movements of the world. The springs of human action being always the same, and always acting in the same medium of native depravity, the deliverances of the human mind and heart in any particular moral direction cannot materially differ at different times. Means may differ, phraseology

may change, methods of operation may vary, but the premises and the conclusion will be substantially identical. There are new styles of conveyance in the spiritual as well as in the material world, but the starting point and the terminus are the same as of old. We see this illustrated most clearly and forcibly by the periodical recurrence of the same doctrinal heresies, sustaining themselves by the same arguments, and opposing the same objections to the truth, as they did in the by-gone centuries. Millerism, Universalism, and nearly every other form of misbelief, emerge and subside from time to time, and stand to-day, if they stand at all, upon the same arguments and no other, that have had the breath of life beaten out of them on scores of the old battle-fields of Theology.

In connection with these observations upon the history of misbelief, it is obvious to remark that the historical method of presenting the doctrines of the Christian faith is one of the most effective which the theologian can employ. The warm and lively colors of the concrete catch the eye more readily, and hold the attention more closely, than the grave and subdued tints of the abstract.

Every mind appreciates a well authenticated fact, relating to any subject in which the mind is interested. The Theologian, then, who would set any doctrine of revelation in a clear, bright light, and impress his hearers with a sense of its Scriptural authority, can do nothing better than to trace historically its gradual communication to man and his gradual reception of it, from its first faint appeal to the human mind in its infancy, through successive clearer and fuller revelations, as the mind was able to bear, down to the time when the doctrine was announced in all its completeness, "*totus, teres, et rotundus.*" By the same process, he would show more forcibly than in any other way, the mutual connection and interdependence of the two volumes of revelation, and of the earlier and later books of each, when it thus appeared that the earlier prepare for the reception of the later, while the later enable us to understand the otherwise obscure hints and intimations of the former.

Not to protract these general remarks on the value of history and the historical method, we proceed to remark that the ecclesiastical history of Vermont has special claims upon the attention and study of every Vermont minister, and, indeed, of every Vermont christian. To speak only of the enjoyment to be experienced in the study of it, it is beyond question that the facts thus brought to view, and the reflections to which they naturally give rise, will afford an intellectual gratification not to be surpassed by that arising from any other source. Especially is this true in regard to the early history, which partakes very largely of the same romantic element that displays itself in the early civil and political history of Vermont. How could it otherwise than share in that element when the same men were, to no small extent, the actors in ecclesiastical and political affairs. They were men, for the most part, of scanty culture and moderate learning, but sensible, shrewd, and original, and they left their peculiar impress upon all with which they had to do. Many of them were men of deep and decided as well as peculiar piety, with an almost Puritanic quaintness in many of their sayings and doings.

It is a question well worthy of investigation by the student of Vermont ecclesiastical history, whether the first permanent settlement of the State did not have its origin in religious convictions, and was not occasioned by the desire of finding freedom to worship God, as well as was the original settlement of New England by the Pilgrim Fathers. Quite certain is it that the first church organization in the State, the Congregational church in Bennington, consisted mainly of persons who had separated themselves from other churches for the sake of greater liberty and zeal in the Christian Life. It was in fact a Massachusetts church transplanted, bodily, pastor and all, in-

to the wilderness at Bennington, and the concerns of the little colony were managed with reference to the interests of the church as entirely as were the affairs of the colony at Plymouth. And the lesson taught us by the early history of that church in regard to the Christian shrewdness, which, without exercising any intolerance of opinion, or dealing oppressively with persons of different faith, or of no faith at all, nevertheless so managed affairs that religion was the controlling power, and Congregationalism the only form of religion for nearly two thirds of a century, is worth being attended to and practiced upon in these latter days when there are so few communities, if any, in which religious concerns are not made subordinate to social, political, or business considerations.

A thorough acquaintance with the ecclesiastical history of Vermont will relieve its ministers from much of the distressing anxiety they are likely to feel in reference to the success of their labors. For it will assure them of the fact that the places where, little more than half a century ago, the discouragements to the minister were the greatest, and their expectations the faintest, are the very places where now the institutions of the gospel have their firmest foothold, and the churches are strongest in numbers and influence. At that point of time, the minister and church exerted almost no restraining influence upon the depravity which prevailed in such places as Montpelier, St. Albans, Rutland, St. Johnsbury, and other towns, in which we now witness an altogether different state of things. What is said by the historian of the St. Albans Church, in regard to the condition of morals in that town, was true with but slight modifications of the other towns named, and of numerous others. "In addition to the desecration of the Sabbath, which was exhibited every week upon the public square, in the most open and defiant manner, it is said that many of the leading men of the town were habitual and shameless gamblers, and that gaming was practiced, with little attempt at concealment, even upon the Sabbath—that brutal fights at trainings, raisings, and the like gatherings, were of common occurrence—and that intemperance was scarcely regarded as a disgrace, so many being involved in it, and that too, in good standing in other respects, it attracted but little attention." Ministers and Christians, who see and lament a similar state of morals in the places where Providence has cast their lot, may gather hope and courage for the future, as they see the changes that have been wrought through the instrumentality of the gospel.

An acquaintance with the ecclesiastical history of the State will furnish at least one ground of encouragement for those ministers, possibly the majority in the State, who do not hope, and cannot reasonably expect ever to see their churches large and strong, but who must needs content themselves with maintaining the *status in quo*, if indeed they are spared the painful sight of churches continually declining, and verging towards extinction. That is the present and prospective condition of many churches in the more strictly rural parishes. Business is going to decay, population is diminishing, emigration is sapping the very life-blood of society and the church, and the tendencies of everything are downward. But the past history of our churches shows us that even this state of things is not without its mitigations and compensations. It is from these same churches, which barely hold their own as to membership and organic power, that there come the principal recruits for the ranks of the ministry. It is curious to observe that the church in Cornwall, whose membership has decreased two-fifths in forty years, has given birth to almost a score of ministers, and among them some of the leading theologians in the land, while the Montpelier church, smaller forty years ago than that in Cornwall, but now having more than twice as many members, has produced but one minister, native of that town; that the church in Thetford, which has decreased 20 per cent. has produced sixteen ministers, while the church in St. Albans, which has increased fifty per cent., has produced but two; and that the church in Halifax, which has all that time been dwindling away, till it has at last become utterly extinct, has,

during the lingering consumption of which it died, given birth to ten ministers and missionaries, while the church at St. Johnsbury, which has become four bands, with an aggregate membership of more than half a thousand, has sent out only two ministers. Here is encouragement for the minister or member of a stationary or declining church, as well as a subject for the philosophical historian to speculate upon, and inquire into the reason of this contrast.

Notwithstanding what has been said of the advantages of an acquaintance with the ecclesiastical history of Vermont, these advantages and whatever others of the same kind, are practically denied to those who might be benefitted by them. The ecclesiastical history of Vermont is a sealed book because an unwritten book. Fragmentary portions of it exist in a printed form, as chapters in local histories, as church manuals, as historical sermons, as articles in periodicals. But these fragments are few in number, and small in bulk, and there are not many persons who possess them all, or even the major part of them. Other, larger, and more valuable portions exist in the form of centennial and semi-centennial sermons, which have been preached, but remain as yet in manuscript, accessible only to the authors.* Some portions exist in the form of church records, very many of which are called records on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle, because they record little or nothing that one wants to know. But by far the largest, and that the most interesting and instructive, remains in the memories of ministers and other Christians, who could tell, if they would, of glorious revivals, and the agencies by which they were carried forward, of afflictions and tribulations, and how out of them all the Lord delivered them, and of the ebb and flow of Christian life, by which the churches have been built up and made strong, or divided, scattered and peeled. He who should attempt to make himself acquainted with the ecclesiastical history of Vermont, would soon discover that he had attempted a task, compared with which the study of the Hebrew language, or of the Hamiltonian philosophy, would be mere child's play.

To collect and digest these abundant and widely scattered materials, to select judiciously from the great mass, and to present the solid facts in an accessible form, would be a task requiring immense toil, indeed, but nevertheless worthy to be done, and, when done, a work of great and permanent value. Such a work should contain, in the first place, a history of each individual church, from its foundation, setting forth the circumstances in which it was founded, and the facts attending its rise and progress, the method by which it was built up, the special difficulties it had to encounter, the peculiar means by which its prosperity was promoted or its decline effected, and, in general, whatever has helped to bring it to its present state. In connection with the history of each church, there should be a record of the lives and labors of its ministers, with such an analysis of their personal and official character as will exhibit and explain their relations to the growth and character of the church. In some cases this must needs be a very prominent feature of the work. Such men as Merrill of Middlebury, Hopkins of New Haven, Clark of Bennington, Jackson of Dorset, Worcester and Merrill of Peacham, Birge of Guildball, Brainard of Randolph, Smith of St. Albans, and Burton of Thetford—not to mention a score of other names that occur to me—are not to be dismissed with a paragraph. The impress which they made upon their churches was so deep and strong that it is visible to this day, and will remain visible for long years to come.


Nor should there be omitted a similar record concerning the men whom each church has given to the ministry. With a not unholy pride may the Congregational churches of this State point to the five hundred and fifty native sons of Vermont who have entered the ministry, and say: "These

* A Sermon preached in Bennington, by Rev. Isaac Jennings, on the Centennial Anniversary of the organization of the Bennington Church, is worthy of especial mention; and, if ever given to the press, it will be found to be the most valuable contribution to the ecclesiastical history of Vermont that has yet been made.

are my jewels." They are found in positions of usefulness, gaining respect for themselves and honor for their native State, and doing good service in the cause of Christ, all over the land from the St. Lawrence to the Sacramento, and from the Kennebec to "the continuous woods where rolls the Oregon." You will find a Vermont minister in the extreme South-west of Texas, doing picket duty so far in advance of the ecclesiastical body to which he belongs that it has never yet held a session within two hundred miles of him. You will find one in Washington Territory, preaching the gospel in a house of worship built at his own charges, and planting Congregational institutions there in advance of all others. You will find them all along the perilous edge of battle, where it raged and still rages between the advancing spirit of freedom and the retreating spirit of slavery. You will find them wherever there is a blow to be struck for truth and righteousness, wherever there is a giant evil to be fought and subdued, wherever there is work to be done for God and humanity; and wherever you find them, they are not ashamed of the mother who bore them, and she has no occasion to be ashamed of them.

The ecclesiastical history of Vermont will not be completed when all the facts are put on record. There yet remains the not less severe task of determining and announcing the philosophy of the facts. It is of comparatively small account to know that such and such events took place, unless it can be determined with some reasonable degree of certainty why they took place. It is only because we reason from like causes to like effects that a knowledge of the past can be of any service to us in forecasting the future, or can aid us in our endeavor to reproduce any of the desirable features of the past. If we have the effects only, the facts, our acquaintance with history will be of small value to us. There is need, therefore, of rigid investigation into the hidden causes of the events which are put on record, that so those events may stand in their true light, and may reflect a light that shall not mislead us in our way through the future.

It is hardly necessary to say that an ecclesiastical history of Vermont, upon the plan now proposed, is not a work to be accomplished by any one person. No man could possibly achieve the undertaking, unless by devoting his whole time to a task, in which there are great difficulties to encounter, toilsome work to do, not a few rebuffs and disappointments to experience, and little recompense to be received for all, except the satisfaction of doing a good service to the churches. This suggests the one practical observation, with which this essay closes. Every minister should feel under imperative obligations thoroughly to investigate, and put on record, the history of his own church, as his personal contribution to a history of all the churches. No one can do this as well as he. Much of its history has taken place under his own eye, and is the result of his own labors. He has more ready access than any other person can have to all the sources of information that need be consulted. He needs to know the history for his own sake and for the sake of the church, for he cannot understand his church unless he knows the experiences through which it has passed. If he does not do the work, it is very likely never to be done. Let every minister, when he returns from Convention, make it his earliest labor to write the history of his church, and having written it, to make sure that it is preserved, by committing it to the press. By this means, and this only, can we reasonably expect ever to accumulate the materials of which to construct "The Ecclesiastical History of Vermont."

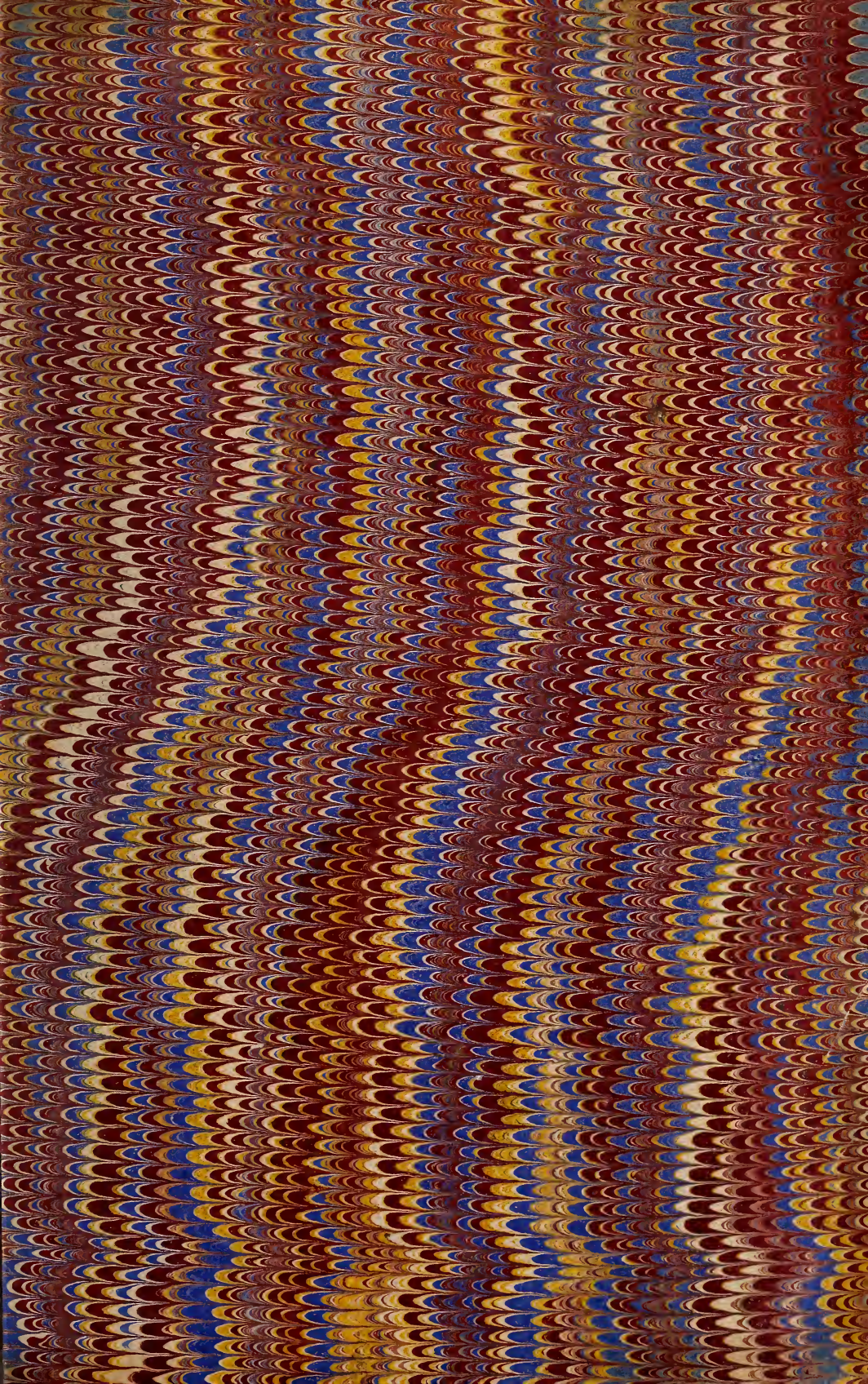




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